

# *Just Write*

Gloucester County Library System

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Writers' Group Selections

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## HATS OFF TO BASEBALL CAPS

*By Caroline Kalfas*

My sons' growing hat collection became a problem.

Sprawled across the cement floor in our basement, the baseball caps that the two brothers had worn and collected from toddlers to teenagers presented a walking hazard for anyone trying to get to the freezer or storage areas.

The clump of cherished hats was like the red carpet at the Oscars, rolled out in a place of prestige for everyone to see. But unlike the Hollywood rug, no one was allowed to step on the lane of brims and multicolored fabrics. The beloved exhibit was off limits except to admirers from afar.

But my clumsy feet rarely made a clean jump over the hats each time I gently hurdled myself to the freezer to grab a pack of blueberries for morning pancakes.

My dad had a hat collection. Some of his caps mingled with others in the pile. I never understood the point of his owning a bunch of hats that he never wore. But I added to his collection at birthdays and on Father's Day and brought him souvenir caps from various travels and vacations. He kept them neatly stacked inside a cabinet.

My sons inherited his love of hats, but they didn't like hiding their collection in a living room cupboard or on the top shelf of a coat closet. They wanted the hats where they could see them, displayed on the spacious floor.

Recently, after months of sidestepping the collection and warning that an alternative display solution must be found, I scooped up all of the sun protectors into a basket and headed for the laundry room. The hats filled the washer, and to keep the shape of the brims intact, I made a makeshift clothesline near my office window and strung the wet hats like beads to dry in the sun for a few days instead of letting them flop around in the drum of the dryer.

Yes, the hats cluttered my work space, but to my satisfaction, they no longer remained on the floor.

I remembered discussing my sons' growing collection and how best to display the baseball caps one Christmas at the dinner table with a special aunt. She suggested that I string them near the ceilings in my children's rooms similar to the way they now hung high above my desk. But the solution was insufficient because the kids couldn't read the hat logos from a side angle, and removing a cap to wear from the lineup was difficult, especially from the middle.

Hanging the hats individually on a wall required too many hooks. Stacking them concealed their designs. My sons liked their floor solution, which displayed each hat's beauty, somewhat like squares on a crumpled quilt. But the upkeep was impractical. The hats got kicked around and dirtied on the floor. The Internet turned up ideas for a solution, but none worked for us.

The collection drying in the office periodically caught my attention while I worked.

A *Top Gun* hat, that's sure old, I thought, remembering the movie starring Tom Cruise, Meg Ryan and Kelly McGillis.

A black Beijing Olympics hat from 2008 got me doing the math. Did the *Bird's Nest* debut that many years ago?

A pink cap from N.C. State stirred up memories from my freshman year living on the seventh floor of Lee dorm.

After the hats in my office thoroughly dried, I began putting them away one by one into a plastic storage box. The purple Little League cap that my youngest son wore the year of his team's first championship and the four Boy Scout hats that should have been displayed at my oldest son's Eagle Scout ceremony – they all went into the box.

Suddenly, I understood what this unruly and never-ending collection that had annoyed me for years meant to my sons. The hats never were destined to be contained. They needed to be seen, worn and touched to activate fond memories.

My heart appreciated several red-faded, threadbare Philadelphia Phillies' hats that lingered from the 2011 and 2012 seasons when my kids were glued to the athletic achievements of players Raul Ibanez and Chase Utley. My fingers pinched several hats representing sports teams including the Boston Celtics, the East

Carolina Pirates, the Durham Bulls and the Atlanta Braves. Into the box went fishing hats the kids wore during summers at Topsail Beach, N.C., and tourist hats from trips to Greece.

Thinking about how much money we have spent on hats over the years made me cringe. But remembering the smiles on the faces of the people who wore them rendered the cash well spent.

Labeled and packed away, the hats remained in the basement for storage. Safe from being stepped on, they joined several treasured boxes of family photo albums and scrapbooks.

If someday my sons find and open the box, compelling them to spread the hats back on the floor in curiosity and admiration, I won't be surprised.

Hat's off to their baseball caps and the memories they evoke. I hope my sons' collection continues to overflow – just not on the floor.

## **“Wise’s Gardeners” Save Petersburg: June 15, 1864”**

### Part I

By Ben Carlton

Private William Russell of the 26<sup>th</sup> Virginia Infantry watched anxiously from his rifle pit near Battery 2 as the enemy steadily advanced through the trees toward the Confederate breastworks. “[W]e had such a small force here,” fretted Russell, “it made me tremble to see them advancing on us.” The small force Russell referred to in his diary was the motley collection of 2,200-odd soldiers, local militia, and artillerists under the command of Brigadier General Henry Alexander Wise, thinly posted from Battery Number 1 on the Appomattox River to Butterworth’s Bridge on the Jerusalem Plank Road. These soldiers manned the field fortifications of the imposing Dimmock line that protected Petersburg, Virginia, the works extending almost 10 miles around the city. But Wise’s men could barely cover the first four miles of the northeastern section of trenches; at that, the infantry had to be spaced out one man to every four and a half yards. General P.G.T. Beauregard, in overall command at Petersburg, described the defenses as “ineffably and contemptibly weak.” The works were strong but undermanned (Beauregard complained that it would take “at least 25,000 men to hold them”), and the fighting ability and resolve of Wise’s Brigade were still in question. Most of Wise’s men “had hardly been under fire before,” Beauregard wrote. In fact, for most of the war, Wise’s Brigade had been on garrison duty, helping to construct and man the defenses of Richmond and later serving in the same capacity near Charleston, South Carolina. Thus the brigade was dubbed “the Life Insurance Company,” or derided as “Wise’s Gardeners” for the vegetable gardens the men grew and tended when not on guard duty. Lieutenant Fred Fleet of the 26<sup>th</sup> Virginia complained in a letter to his brother dated 24 March 1863, “...it is a sort of disgrace to belong to Gen. Wise’s command, as we are called ‘Wise’s Gardeners’, ‘Fishbone Brigade’, etc.”

Yet, somehow, Wise's Gardeners found themselves facing roughly 16,000 veterans of Union Major General William F. Smith's XVIII Corps, detached from the Army of the James and deploying for battle on a hot day in the middle of June at the beginning of the war's fourth summer. In support following on the heels of Smith's division, was another 20,000 to 25,000 troops of General Winfield Scott's II Corps of the Army of the Potomac, recently ferried across the James River and heading for Petersburg. In fact, General U.S. Grant had stolen a march on General Robert E. Lee and, so far, all had gone according to plan as Grant began to shift his entire army south of the James to strike the Confederates unawares. On 15 June `1864, Wise's weak line was all that stood between the crucial rail center of Petersburg – the gateway to Richmond – and the Federal army. The fall of Petersburg appeared imminent and would surely mean the evacuation of Richmond and, perhaps, the collapse of the Confederate government. Suddenly General Wise and his men has been thrust from a quiet sector of the war to the forefront of battle – indeed, into the breach. All Russell could do now was squeeze off another round and pray, "Oh Lord...be Thou our shield and hiding place."

###

Henry Wise, a former governor of Virginia (1856-60) – (it was he who presided over the trial and hanging of radical abolitionist John Brown) – was appointed brigadier general on 5 June 1861. Despite his 57 years and lack of any formal military training, Wise raised the "Wise Legion," a unit consisting of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, and campaigned with it in the wilds of western Virginia. There he chafed under the command of another ex-Virginia governor, John B. Floyd, whose commission as brigadier general predated his own, much to Wise's mortification. Consequently, Wise and Floyd fought more with each other than with the Federals. Even the patient intervention of

General R. E. Lee could not mollify the feuding ex-governors/generals, and an exasperated President Jefferson Davis finally recalled Wise to Richmond. Wise, the political general, lobbied to retain elements of his Legion, the 46<sup>th</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> Virginia regiments, and with these troops, was sent to what was probably thought to be a quiet front in North Carolina. But at Roanoke Island, Wise and his command soon met with disaster. While Wise was bedridden at Elizabeth City with a severe attack of pleurisy, a Federal amphibious force led by General Ambrose Burnside overran the heavily outnumbered Confederates, capturing 2,500 rebel troops on the island. Tragically for Wise, his eldest and favorite son, Captain O. Jennings Wise, was numbered among the slain.

Although officially exonerated by the Confederate Congress for the debacle at Roanoke Island, Wise's military capabilities remained suspect. Ironically, it was Union General George McClellan who probably saved Wise's military career. McClellan's ponderous advance up the Peninsula toward Richmond in the spring of 1862 forced the Confederates to employ every available, able-bodied man in Virginia – and General Wise was definitely available. The old general was once again placed in a rearguard position, however, protecting the batteries at Chaffin's Bluff along the north bank of the James River, 10 miles southeast of Richmond. Along with the remnants of his shattered Legion, his command now included the 26<sup>th</sup> Virginia regiment and Fourth Virginia Battalion Heavy Artillery. So far, it had been a quiet war for the latter units, which had been formerly stationed at the fortifications at Gloucester Point on the York River. Then in May 1862, the heavy naval guns had to be spiked and the works abandoned when General Joseph E. Johnston evacuated Yorktown in the face of McClellan's besieging Army of the Potomac. Despite many desertions along the way, the 26<sup>th</sup> Virginia and the Fourth Battalion marched 125 miles to join Johnston's army outside of Richmond. Now they formed part of Wise's all-Virginia brigade.

General Wise soon grew impatient with garrison duty as General Lee, who had taken command of the Rebel army after Johnston was seriously wounded, launched a series of desperate battles against McClellan's forces that came to be known as the Seven Days. Unnerved by the ferocity of the attacks, McClellan withdrew his army from the environs of Richmond in what he euphemistically termed a "change of base." Eager to interdict the retreat, Lee ordered aged and nearly deaf General Theophilus Holmes (West Point Class of 1829) to lead his 6,000 troops down the River Road to prevent McClellan from reaching the James and the protection of powerful Union gunboats. Holmes felt his force unequal to the task and asked Wise for help. Only too eager to join the fray, Wise all but abandoned his post at Chaffin's bluff, reinforcing Holmes with two of his regiments. As the combined troops marched along the dirt road, with the Twenty-sixth and Forty-sixth regiments on the extreme right, thousands of tramping feet kicked up large dust clouds visible to Federal artillery posted atop Malvern Hill. These batteries opened fire on the mass as Union gunboats lying a half-mile off in the river began to lob shells at the Rebels as well. A wild rout ensued. Cavalry and artillery units that had ridden ahead of the marching columns panicked and came careening back through Wise's infantry. Lieutenant Fleet wrote, "The batteries passed by in great confusion, some three pieces being left [behind] and the loose horses rushed by, some wounded and seeming mad. One caisson was turned over right by us, and if it had exploded we would all have been killed." As the shells burst all around, General Holmes, who had entered a roadside house just prior to the shelling, emerged from the dwelling, cupped his hand to his ear and announced, "I thought I heard firing."

Wise later boasted that his men had "maintained their posts firmly" during the barrage. The following morning the march resumed until Wise's regiments reached the Quaker Road. There the men deployed to the left of the road in reserve where they waited until nightfall. Around 9:00 p.m., they were ordered to attack what was

thought to be a large body of Federals concealed behind a fence just beyond an open field. General Wise gave the order for Colonel Powhatan R. Page of the Twenty-sixth to form his regiment with the Forty-sixth on the left, and charge the enemy. After dashing across the field, no Yankees were found on the other side.

[To be continued in the next edition of *Just Write*.]

## **A Series of Poems by Teresa Carlton**

### Eulogy

Leaves run freely through the grass  
Across the street  
Their last hurrah 'fore death.

### Winter Bliss

The trees stretch their arms, welcoming the day.  
They shed their clothes hoping for a new coat of snow.

### God's Art Work

The clouds dazzle me - dancing on their stage,  
Providing me with an array of impersonations, dressing in  
their many colors.

### Winter's Dress

Dressing the trees and fence and grass and bench,  
The snow shivers in delight.

## Butterfly

Flirting with the flowers, dancing with the bees,  
Playing hide and seek with me, resting on the trees

Alighting on my finger, laughing on my head  
Following the breezes, wherever it is led.

## The Mind

Tossing and turning  
Mind won't turn off  
It remembers and questions and criticizes and regrets.

When morning comes, it sleeps and says  
DO NOT DISTURB.

## Stillness

Still and silent in the bed,  
you said goodnight to life.

# Just Write

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